

Making Song, Making Sanity: Recovery from Bipolar Disorder

Composer des chansons, reconstruire sa santé mentale : rétablissement d'un trouble bipolaire

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Abstract

I offer an autoethnographic inquiry into the process of finding one's way out of the maze of mental illness; it is an examination of how in the course of creating music to express my suffering from bipolar disorder, I found a poetic and musical expression for my soul. Making music gradually moved my focus away from illness toward imagination and creativity and brought about a major shift in my positioning in terms of my identity, helping me to construct the selfhood of an artist rather than that of an ill person. This transformation is explored in the context of India's music and spiritual tradition and the Western framework of resource-oriented music therapy, an approach that prioritizes participant empowerment and uses music for self-care.

Keywords: music therapy, poetry, bipolar disorder, narrative reconstruction, autoethnography, rehabilitation, self-healing, Indian ragas

Résumé

Cette recherche auto-ethnographique décrit le processus de se sortir du labyrinthe de la santé mentale. Elle examine comment, à travers la découverte de l'acte créatif musical, j'ai pu exprimer la souffrance que m'a amenée un trouble bipolaire et découvrir une source poétique et musicale si bénéfique à l'âme. Le fait de jouer de la musique a graduellement détourné mon attention de la maladie pour la diriger vers l'imagination et la création, ce qui a apporté un changement important dans mon positionnement sur le plan de l'identité en m'aidant à me construire une individualité d'artiste plutôt que celle d'une personne malade. Cette transformation est explorée par la musique et la tradition spirituelle de l'Inde ainsi que le cadre occidental de l'approche musicothérapeutique orientée sur vers les ressources (*resource-oriented music therapy approach*) qui priorise l'autonomie du participant et utilise la musique pour la santé personnelle.

Mots clés : musicothérapie, poésie, trouble bipolaire, reconstruction narrative, auto-ethnographie, réadaptation, autoguerison, raga indiens

Mental illness, in my case bipolar disorder, is a tricky terrain where one lands unexpectedly and unprepared. So when I suddenly found myself there at the age of 20, I did not quite understand what had hit me. More than the shock, it was the label that stunned me, for I was unaware of something like that, or that I could arrive there. That was the start of a long, uncertain road with no companions and, barring what my family could offer, no support systems. I first experienced bipolar disorder in November 1992, and for the next two decades I seesawed between florid highs and seemingly unending glooms, though as I grew older the highs diminished considerably and I experienced chronic depression for several years.

For someone in the throes of any serious illness, the most important concerns are functionality and identity, and like many others I never accepted the disability tag for myself. I didn't realize how seriously incapacitated I was until I was in recovery, my ability to work surfaced, and I was able to successfully plunge myself into scores of musical and academic projects. Prior to recovery, I remained constantly in an inner buzz, unable to calm down and focus my energy for long on any one task.

Naturally, taking up a job or vocation with this inner noise, which would be amplified by external stressors, was not within my capacity. A job requires discipline and regularity, but the only tasks that I could perform on a consistent basis were smaller, goal-oriented ones such as cooking a meal, composing a song, or walking a dog. To me, sanity is the functionality of a person who lives the life of a householder—replete with roles, responsibilities, goals, and everyday issues of life and survival. The absence of this sanity or grounding incapacitated me for days and months.

From childhood I had trained in music, singing with a harmonium¹ as accompaniment. This training began when I was a nine-year-old girl, and except for small interludes, always continued. Music and poetry, in particular devotional or bhakti poetry became the pivot around which my life axis changed. There are many elements within music that can play a catalyzing role toward wellness. Foremost among them for me were music classes (whether I attended them or later offered them), musical composition in multiple genres and languages, and self-directed research into music and its impact on people.

1 A harmonium is an instrument used in South Asia that is akin to an accordion but placed on the floor in front of the musician when played. It is frequently used by musicians as an accompanying instrument. I personally use it for working on new compositions and for teaching.

Within the tradition of bhakti poetry I was drawn toward the nirgun bhakti strand, *nirgun* being the abstract devotion to a formless and quality-less God. One of the foremost poet-philosophers of nirgun bhakti poetry was a weaver called Kabir, who lived in the 16th century in Benares in India. More than five centuries later, I found my poetic and therapeutic voice in Kabir as I wove the garment of my own healing with his poetry as the first pillar of my recovery.

Music as a Health Resource

This study is an autoethnographic account of how I used music as a resource for my own self-healing, which led to my recovery and regaining my selfhood—even going off psychiatric medication in November 2010 after taking it regularly for 18 years. Music as a means for self-healing has a long history. Citing David Aldridge, Marom (1995) stated that “being creative has been seen as a powerful way to bring form out of chaos, find hope in seemingly hopeless situations, and find meaning in suffering” (p. 41). A recent development in music therapy has been the emergence of “an interdisciplinary field of dialogue on the concept of music as a health resource” (Stige, 2005, p. 2). Researchers Batt-Rawden, DeNora, and Ruud (2009) drew attention to the fact that there is a lack of knowledge or methods on how potential beneficial experiences of musicking among people with long-term illnesses can be tapped and transported into health promotion settings (p. 122). Resource-oriented music therapy is concerned with empowerment, self-help, and health promotion through music—that is, focusing on participants’ strengths and potentials (Rolvsjord, 2004) so that they experience “increased self-awareness and a new repertoire of music skills relating to self-care” (Batt-Rawden et al., 2009, p. 120). Musicianship rather than diagnosis is highlighted. As Procter (2001) said, “Nobody comes to music therapy as a schizophrenic, but as a musician—with all their creativity and potential” (p. 6). I invite you to situate this writing in the context of these comments.

Autoethnography

Autoethnography is a qualitative research method that allows researchers to critically examine their own stories by juxtaposing events from their personal histories with larger social contexts: “It is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno)” (Ellis, Adam, & Bochner, 2011, para. 1). Though of recent origin, autoethnography has proven to be a potent method for understanding a phenomenon from one person’s view and from various angles within the same: “A researcher uses tenets of autobiography and ethnography to do and write autoethnography. Thus, as a method, autoethnography is both process

and product” (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). In this case, autoethnography allowed me to narrate, analyze, reconstruct, and interpret my story. Like Ellis (2009), I too assume that

as an autoethnographer, I am both the author and focus of the story, the one who tells and the one who experiences, the observer and the observed, the creator and the created. I am the person at the intersection of the personal and the cultural, thinking and observing as an ethnographer and writing as a storyteller. (p. 13)

Denshire (2013) stated that “in emphasizing the centrality of the personal, this account arguably backgrounds the social or cultural world in which the writing occurs, or rather, reads the social and cultural through the personal” (p. 222). Citing Liz Stanley, Holt (2003) stated that writing about the self inevitably reflects the social because “people do not accumulate their experiences in a social vacuum” (p. 16).

Usually when one writes case studies in music therapy, it is the outsider or client who is the object of study, as in Bruscia’s (1991) definition: “Music therapy is an interpersonal process in which the therapist uses music and all its facets—physical, emotional, mental, social, aesthetic and spiritual—to help clients to improve, restore or maintain health” (p. 5). This is what this music inquiry has been for me, except that the therapist was not an outsider, but my own self. Just as a music therapist would respond to psychiatric patients’ suffering by helping them improvise with musical ideas and new musical expressions, so have I with myself. While I thought that I was just creating music for my own pleasure, in effect my music-making would be therapeutic for me in the long run. However, to develop the ability of inquiring into one’s own self as the therapist/healer, the recipient/researcher must invoke a different kind of attitude, something I have attempted in the course of this writing.

Mental Illness and Music: My Story

Depression can be debilitating. What Smyth (2002) mentioned of trauma is often equally true of depression:

Its effect may be manifest in a range of well-documented effects: a shattered belief system; disempowerment and deskilling; feelings of helplessness and dehumanization; loosened grasp of “reality”; mind/body alienation; disturbed sleep; acute attacks of fear; inability to engage in pre-trauma relationships and lifestyle, inability to trust or to feel safe. (p. 74)

In bipolar depression, the troughs can go so deep that suicide is a frequent thought, often on the mind. Jamison (1994) warned that “the list of writers and artists who ended their lives by suicide is staggeringly long” (p. 249). Logically, it is unlikely that someone who is going through depression can sing or engage in other creative activity. Severe depression, as I was usually in for months on end, entails a loss of artistic expression. While artistic expression is a manifestation of an expansive spirit, which may expand in sorrow, gloom, dejection, loss, or sadness, depression brings about a reversal in the personality, a still mind, with no ideas, emotionally frozen. The body, too, is affected directly and indirectly, as if its whole existence is under siege.

This emotional freezing also makes occupational responses slow and every task laboured. Musical engagement may not be something for such a person even to consider. Only if others are present to facilitate a musical engagement can someone engage in music during such times. Lehtonen (2005) confirmed the value of such interventions saying, “Music gives hope, consolation and new ideas in the hard, difficult, emotionally trying situations of life. In this sense music also functions as an important means of self-healing” (p. 8).

In India the experience of formally learning music can be troublesome due to the presence of multiple modes of learning that are prevalent from the *gharana parampara*² to music teaching within a university setting and all possible combinations along this spectrum. For most who learn music, there are no clear roadmaps to follow and no certain outcomes waiting at the end of any path unless the teacher facilitates them. For people who are afflicted with a mood disorder, this uncertainty can easily aggravate their disordered state. I was no exception. However, the path to healing also lay within this maze, and the music and poetry, starting from Kabir, was my vehicle for this transformation.

Kabir: The Higher Self

My work with the poetry of Kabir began in 1999 and has continued ever since. This discovery of Kabir’s poetry as my own expression launched a

² The *guru-shishya parampara* of yore is the *gharana parampara* of the last few centuries; it is an age-old tradition of learning continuing for centuries up to modern times, especially in traditional practices in India, where knowledge is transferred by the guru to the disciples in small groups. All disciples would live under the guru’s roof like a family and serve those who taught them. This way knowledge was transferred under close scrutiny and discipline. There were many advantages as it ensured the gurus could watch over their disciples very closely and teach them in accordance with their abilities.

phase of musical composition for me that eventually became the foundation of my pathway for recovery. As a poet, I first respond to poetry, and when there is some poetry that connects with me as my own, I set it to music. Over time and from one kind of poetry to another, I expressed myself profusely through poetry and music woven into one another.

There were three key milestones in my experience with Kabir. The first was when Kabir's poetry became my voice. By becoming my voice, the poetry allowed me to sing my pain out in words that were already written, and I only had to add the musical melody to them. In the next stage my voice became Kabir's voice, or there was a fusion of thought to such an extent that I could communicate in the same voice as Kabir. By this I mean I could write my own musical lyrics, addressing them to the same divine entity to whom Kabir had addressed his devotion. The third stage is my current one, where as a healed person not only can I respond to the musical needs of others—whether they be therapeutic, educational, or psychological—but I can also express myself as an artist at many poetic levels and feel at home in many poetic and musical genres.

As with spiritual traditions worldwide, which recognize the divine in every form of life, Kabir repeatedly reminds me to look at life as ephemeral and not to get attached to my present role or to forget my divine essence. The poetry of Kabir challenges all possible institutions including identification with the body or attachments to commodities or to others in relationships. My first marriage was over no sooner than it happened in 1999, though socially it lasted for at least two years. I was nearly 27 then, and as soon as the fault lines appeared, I was deeply anguished. On the one hand I had a disorder; on the other hand I had a marriage in which I felt abandoned by my husband. My marital home, just like other traditional marital homes in India, comprised many members of my husband's family. I sought refuge and escape in musical notes and then in the poetry of Kabir because I was unable to participate in life in my home.

That was the beginning of my existential search for authenticity in all relationships. I desperately had to get out of the emotional abyss I had landed in, and marriage seemed to be no balm for even a single day to my troubled self. While the world would think that I must be happy in my new marriage, I was in fact searching for my lost self in Kabir.

By interacting with Kabir's poetry, I found an outlet for my inner suffering and for recognizing my beingness as well as a reminder that I should not get carried away by the moment. My pain could be expressed in socially legitimate ways, without anyone realizing that what I was singing

was not merely a *bhajan* (devotional poem/song) but in fact personal anguish. As observed by Nicol (2006), "Music brings musicians face-to-face with themselves, offering a vehicle for self-expression and self-exploration. Exploring the nuances of music goes hand in hand with exploring the nuances of one's self. Music reveals individuals, both to themselves and to others"(para. 7). Later in the course of therapy, I understood the concept of projection and how I had perhaps seen my Higher Self in Kabir. I began a new phase of musical expression in search of the eternal "Why me?" question. Like any other person wounded in an intimate relationship, I was also posing this question to God.

Kabir's poetry addresses the soul and weaves poetic ideas about issues as diverse as devotion to god, relationships, warning, ridicule, dismissal, challenge, and mockery. He repeatedly talks about the ephemeral nature of the body and reminds us about the eternal divine, which is omnipresent and formless.³ As mine was a quest for a guru who would explain to me the reasons for my setback in marriage, the first songs I composed were ones that extolled the virtues of such a guru:

*My wise teacher has held my arm
Else I would have been swept away
From a raven a swan I became
Losing (distinction of) caste, class, and race
Kind look from that benevolent being
As though all leaves of the branch have been cleansed.*

[Please note that poems and songs have been translated into English]

But the mind was too restless to practice new compositions diligently; rather, the deep and overpowering urge was to create, like releasing a pressure off myself. Another song went thus:

*My wise teacher is a dyer
He has dyed the garment I don
Washing away the dark inky colour
He has dyed me in his own terracotta hue
Strangely enough the more I wash it
The deeper it becomes.*

3 Kabir refers to this entity as Ram, not to be confused with the embodied Ram who is the main hero of the Indian epic *Ramayana*.

A time of crisis is often an opportunity for growth. My musical expression burst forth out of the depths of my anguish—not the sort of expression where I would be singing for long hours but the sort where I repeatedly sought a venting out through the poetry of Kabir, or even at times my own. Once I found a *pada* (a kind of poem) that I could connect with, I would search for an appropriate Indian *raga* (broadly speaking, a musical scale) from my existing repertoire that could be used as the musical canvas on which to compose the melody. However, it was not the *raga* that was important at that juncture. More important was to express myself, so as to survive the current ordeal. I would oscillate from one anxious state to another; every task looked huge and unmanageable and the atmosphere around felt alien and hostile.

The Enemy Within

As marital life provided no respite or companionship, I was pushed toward learning music seriously and to Kabir's poetry and its spirituality; my identification with the poetry was immense as I saw the poetry fitting my life completely:

*The heart swollen with pride roams
Ignorant that there are no lasting bonds in the world*

With my marriage crumbling, I became a prolific composer. Half the time I would not fully comprehend the lyrics of the songs, written as they were in a medieval dialect, but as long as I could see a poetic resonance with my inner anguish, I would just connect with a few words or lines and start working on a musical tune. Often I would compose those *padas* as songs that were a commentary on my own life. Slowly my repertoire also began to expand from Kabir to other bhakti poets, the first among them being Meera.⁴ Many more bhakti poets followed later.

Often I would compose those *padas* as songs that provided commentary on my own life. One of these songs was recorded by a filmmaker who was making a film on the singing traditions of Kabir. Though that song erupted out of my anguish at the indifference of my husband to my suffering, it was a metaphor that was meant to be an address to the soul (as wife) to not forget its Supreme Maker (as husband). For me the meaning was very literal; it had nothing to do with the dichotomy of soul and the Supreme—it was my call to

⁴ Meera or Meerabai was a Krishna-bhakti poet who lived at approximately the same time as did Kabir. She worshipped the embodied cowherd Hindu God, Krishna, and was a Rajput princess by birth who relinquished all riches in her childhood, pining for her beloved Krishna. Given her royal birth, she initially faced a lot of hardship at the hands of her husband and society because she defied all customs and traditions.

myself, about my husband, who would be leaving for work and I would be still sleeping:

*Wake up beloved why sleep now
Night is gone, why while away the day?*⁵

A song that lamented about my solitude and lack of friends was most befitting, too:

*O brother, rare (indeed are) friends of Kabir
Who would I go and tell this repeatedly to?*

But there were also a few songs that I truly comprehended and composed with that knowledge. The following is the most significant:

*Heart of mine revels in simplicity, my friend
What joy I find in singing to the Almighty, I do not in any (worldly) riches*

The next song described my inner state. I pined to be with my husband, and I addressed that pining to the Almighty, for the human in my husband's flesh and blood seemed very insignificant, small, and hurtful as compared to his cosmic potential that I carried in my heart:

*When will I see you, my dearest beloved
Without you, my body agonizes*

Before they can be performed publicly, Indian ragas require a special sort of reposeful, meditative attitude in the practitioner, but repose is not innate to a person with a hyper inner state. My state was extremely volatile and edgy, and the broken marriage further added a loss of self-esteem and social face. I went into the most paralyzing of depressions as the setbacks of the past abuses would surface in my mind, from some past memories that would not leave. "The Enemy Within" was the spectre of depression that would keep stalking me and would not let me off even for a moment, making me irritable, insecure, fearful, and restless. However, this was also the time when my musical identity started forming from within the wounded self by closely identifying Kabir's poetry as my own musical voice.

⁵ This song had some unexpected outcomes as a number of people from all over the country saw the film and remembered me for the little appearance I made. I still hear references to that song or my presence in the film. In my own mind this was not one of the more significant songs of my repertoire. I sang it at the time of the filming simply because it came to my mind then. The song is titled "jaag piyari."

Jamison (1996) stated that manic depression “is a disease that both kills and gives life. Fire, by its nature, both creates and destroys” (p. 123). It was much later that I understood how the moods of people so often are determined by the circumstances of their lives, and people have very little control over circumstances. So their moods make them “volatile,” “unpredictable,” and “untrustworthy” in the eyes of others. Frequently my moods, like rising tides, brought forth a gush of artistic and poetic expression.

In the winter of 2000, I released my first Kabir recording, which was a two-cassette album with 12 original songs. The album was released in a small concert, my first one. I had found a musical—nay, artistic—toehold through Kabir. This marked the first step of my identity transformation, though my learning of music was still uncertain, and the presence of inner haze limited my ability to focus.

Identity Transformation: From “Disability” to “Ability”

It is not easy to accept a disability as part of one’s identity, and more so when it is accompanied by stigma. Therefore, during those phases when my mobility was sufficiently restored and I was able to set aside my disability nomenclature, I took to the path of advocacy for music as therapy, writing for academic journals and newspapers and starting to teach music to students, even if I was still somewhat debilitated. Slowly I began upon a rehabilitation path. In a curious sort of way I thought that being bipolar made me more gifted, creative, and prolific, and I did not lose sight of that creative potential, trying to harness it in every possible way.

Therapy is ultimately about healing and restoring a person to functionality to whatever extent possible; for a musician, however, along with musical engagement in a private manner, one also needs to carve an identity in the public eye. Citing Gregory G. Garske, McReynolds (2002) wrote, “Despite a strong desire to work, functional competencies, and educational qualifications, many of those who have severe and persistent psychiatric disabilities have no long-term attachment to the labor market” (p. 64). Participating in the labour market was not an option for me, for the stress of working life was not something I could have managed.

Being able to express myself musically in the public domain gave my flagging morale an infinitesimal boost. Musical composition became a necessary part of my creative expression, but while I was totally attached to classical music, I was in no condition for the rigorous practice it requires. I understood theoretical concepts and nuances of Indian music—that is,

that the final spiritual purpose of Indian classical music is said to be an introversion or inner quest rather than an outer quest—yet a different world stormed inside me, which would not permit that introversion.

Identifying Resources for Recovery

In 2003 I met my Jungian analyst, whose first words still resound in me: “I respect you for your work in music therapy, for you are a fellow professional.” These words were a great source of strength to me; I too was “someone” and not just someone with a psychiatric label who had gone to seek her counsel about my affairs.

Language is of paramount significance in the helping professions, for it is through language that everything is established, including illness categories, symptoms, and classifications. Our selves reside in language. To label another through a well-honed paradigm of language gives the professional power over another, which at the same time robs the labelled person of power. So when a professional seemingly returns your power to you, it is a significant moment indeed, as I experienced it then. When professionals describe us in certain terms, we also adopt that terminology, and instead of believing that we are people with a certain condition, we become the condition—a bipolar or a schizophrenic. To build an alternate definition for oneself in such a scenario can happen only if there are some ways to escape the dominant linguistic environment.

As part of my advocacy for music as therapy, I found myself interacting with children with multiple disabilities, hearing impairments, developmental delays, and other disabilities, and this brought me a much needed outlet for social interaction at this juncture. I was gladly welcomed on many platforms, including opportunities to offer workshops and lectures, as I was talking about something unheard of in India at that time. Surprisingly, in all those interactions I never came across anyone with a diagnosis of a mental illness, which was further confirmation about how “invisible” it all was.

Searching For My Musical “Voice”

By musical voice I not only refer to a physical voice but also the voice of the soul, my inner voice, which is an expression of an inner churning. I refer to that voice in which we sing, or are taught to sing, and which may have had rigorous training and years of practise behind it. This musical voice is present in everyone, but for those who train in music, this voice learns to express itself openly. In others it may remain dormant or appear only occasionally—for example, when someone just hums something or sings a little bit. By voice of the soul, I refer to the expression of the individual, which is not necessarily confined to musicians but is there in everyone.

As someone who also expresses herself through the written word, it is only when the written word of another resonates with me completely that I pick it up to weave a musical melody into it. Musical expression for me has mostly been the voice of my soul, which becomes a mechanism for articulating inner dilemmas, churning, and angst. It has been a complex weave of many strands, which blurs the boundaries between my musical-self, my soul's voice, my performer-self, and my researcher-self. In looking for solutions for others, I have found solutions for myself. In explaining ideas to students, I have gained new insights.

As noted by Jamison (1994), "No one is creative when paralytically depressed, psychotic, institutionalized, in restraints or dead because of suicide" (p. 249). A deep depression makes you lose your voice for long stretches of time. For myself, there would be months at a time when no creation or musical note emanated from my throat. Frequently, I have looked at my musical instruments and thought, "Really? Could I sing once upon a time?" It seemed impossible and beyond reach.

After such passages of time, when the spring came and frozen ideas and notes inside me thawed, I mustered courage to get up and started teaching myself to sing all over again, frequently from the start of the musical scales. Having lost that flexibility of throat that I had attained in moments of high artistic performance, and which I had sometimes also been able to exhibit in public spaces, to start from the beginning was often heartbreaking. Jamison (1994) reminded us that "although manic-depressive illness is much more common in writers and artist than in the general population, it would be irresponsible to romanticize an extremely painful, destructive and lethal disease" (p. 257).

Khayal—A Thought Can Transform an Expression

Traditionally in India when we learn classical music with our teachers, we are taught *khayals* in different ragas, though there are other forms of songs, too, such as *dhrupad*, *dhamar*, *thumri*, etc. Khayals are improvisatory songs that have limited lyrical content.⁶ As we mature we are taught more than one khayal in the same raga. Due to an emphasis on learning by the ear

⁶ In the parlance of Hindustani classical music, which is practised in the north of India, khayal is a form of a song that literally translates to "thought" or "idea." In this form the lyrical or poetic content is very limited, often nothing more than a few lines, and artistic merit lies in weaving in an increasing number of musical notes to express the same few lines. This is a purely classical form as opposed to *bhajan/pada*, which may be seen as "light" or semi-classical due to a greater poetic and emotional content. *Bhajan*, *khayal*, and *ghazal* are all different forms of songs.

in our musical tradition, the repertoire of a raga frequently gets carried over for generations, and the same khayals, with minimum variations, are sung for decades or sometimes even hundreds of years.

My learning of music has been a little quirky due to my attachment to the poetic content of songs I was taught. I would not like a raga if I did not like the words of the khayal. For me, my songs have to express an inner truth or be consonant with my ideas, and as I learnt more ragas, my dissatisfaction grew. I believe in a non-dualistic spirituality, and the verbal content of a song that I had been taught may have been referring to a king or prince or someone else whom I felt no connection with. When God or the divine is referred to as an idea, it allows for multiple interpretations, but if we express it by name, calling it Jesus or Krishna or Shiva, we give the divine entity a human interpretation, assuming that the God is just like us humans. Until I was introduced to Jung and thereafter encountered the work of Joseph Campbell, I had always had a problem with this human-centered construction of the divine.

Therefore Kabir became an appropriate expression for me of a tradition with a formless concept of God, and the lack of spiritual connection with the available khayals made me want to sing my own, reflecting thoughts as they occurred to me. For every raga, I wanted to have my own musical compositions that reflected my mind rather than a given state of mind in someone else. At that time my outer circumstances were mired in gloom and sadness, isolation and ignominy, and music was the sole escape for me. For when I sang or pretended to sing, nobody disturbed me, as music was sometimes an escape for me from life around.

As Bond (cited in McReynolds, 2002) said, "Whether persons with psychiatric disabilities have never learned social skills or have lost them, most of these individuals have marked skill deficits in social skills and interpersonal situations." I quite reflected this picture myself, so in 2007, with three dogs, I moved into my own house in a suburb, wanting to live alone and find my own voice—literally as well as metaphorically. I believed that if I kept living with my parents, I would never be able to figure out the reality of daily survival. My mother promised me a maintenance amount out of her own salary, but I had to manage my home and my finances and learn to be responsible. This proved to be another turning point in my life.

The new place brought opportunities for self-reliance. In addition, my former bonds were weakened or lost. Living alone in the suburbs made getting out of the home somewhat of a problem, especially since I did not want to leave my dogs alone for long periods of time. It was a difficult situation

emotionally as the only options I had were to sing and study. However, music cannot remain static in a restless soul like mine. After releasing a four-CD album, I had decided to stop working on new Kabir compositions as they had all begun to sound identical due to my limited knowledge of music and my fear of working with ragas that I was not at ease with. Having reached a point where the songs no longer reflected my inner reality—that I was not lost to the world, that I desired to communicate to the divine—I sought that cosmic maker in the voice of Kabir once again, though this time the format was different.

Stopping further compositions of padas, I turned by chance toward another poetic form, a *doha*. The first time I strung the words of a couplet on the notes of a raga (*Mian ki Todi*), instead of a bhajan it became a khayal due to its brevity. I was already very fond of that raga and I dove into the raga's depths to find my own expression. Now I was not singing a hundred-year-old composition that had been handed down as part of my learning—I was singing my own composition, using the language and poetry of Kabir.

Our tradition in India prides itself on learning with a guru—*guru-mukh*, the “mouth of the teacher”—but I had no options available for learning, expanding my musical repertoire, or looking at new interpretations of the same musical notes. I remember there was a particular Kabir book that I would have open in front of me perpetually to look for new poetry. As mentioned, after completing my four-CD album, I dared not work on more compositions for fear of becoming repetitive. I had meanwhile expanded my spiritual music repertoire in other directions.

Sloan (1999) said that “singing aids us in grieving and soothes us when we're wounded much in the same way it helps us to celebrate. It encourages, if not forces us to release energy in a positive manner” (p. 11). I often went back to play my instruments, to sing, to compose, and to ponder new ideas. Even when I listened to music—which I did less and less often and increasingly confining myself to the great masters alone—it was with a different analytical and inquisitive engagement. This was still the phase when I was finding my expression through Kabir. The directness, frankness, and challenge in his poetry mirrored my own temperament.

The next shift occurred suddenly. Years had passed and I had not been introduced to any new musical scales or compositions. Listening from a distance, without compositions, without working with new music, I had no new inspiration. To appreciate something, I need to play it in my mind, feel it in my throat, and play with its variations and permutations of notes. On sudden inspiration I picked up a book of music that had a selection of

ragas. I chose one and went over the pentatonic melody a few times in my throat. I toyed with the notes again. The Kabir book of poetry, which had a permanent abode on my harmonium, was lying open to a page with a whole lot of couplets called *saakhi*,⁷ a poetic form similar to the *doha*. I set that *saakhi* in the notes of the new raga I had just discovered.

This was perhaps the biggest breakthrough in my life—I had worked on and taught myself to sing a musical composition in a new raga⁸ without having to learn it from a teacher. I was beyond myself with the joy of this new composition. There are many artists who do this always, but for me who oscillated between uncertain moods and insecurities, whose spirit had been repeatedly broken as a performer, I was excited and speechless. Yet, I did not have many people with whom I could share this great paradigm shift with. To be sure that I was not coming to a hasty conclusion about my success, I worked on this melody for many days—in fact many weeks—and never gave up on it, even as I practised other *khayals* or ragas. I paired it with another work of Kabir that I set to a fast-paced composition, and my raga was ready for performance!

I never thought I could go beyond what I was taught, except to hone it, but having overcome the fear of learning newer ragas, I found I could learn more. And I did, again and again. The world of Hindustani ragas is so rich and potentially infinite that even within the same melody there are innumerable possibilities, depending upon the inner state of the performer or listener. I would constantly dabble with known melodies, and on days when I was troubled, my restlessness or anger or pain or whatever the state might be would express itself through an existing *khayal*, or if the existing repertoire fell short of my expression, a new one would come forth. In this way I worked with many ragas such as *Bhairav*, *Ahir Bhairav*, *Todi*, *Bhoopal Todi*, *Jog*, *Madhukauns*, *Puriya Kalyan*, and so forth. Knowledge is, after all, a matter of imposing order on chaos (Stevens, 1982). My quest for knowledge was not a quest for musical knowledge alone—it was actually a quest for knowledge to quell the anguish of my deep depressions, my social withdrawal, my seclusion, my disconnection with the issues that others spent their lives on. I would not sit down with music when in the throes of inner whirlpools. If at all, it would be singing to bring my pain out, and then the pain would just

7 *Saakhi* is a couplet, which is a two-liner that rhymes poetically and within those two lines the whole idea is conveyed in a musical metre. It is akin to another two-liner that Kabir wrote extensively in called *doha*.

8 This *raga* is called *Madhmad Sarang*. It shares the same notes as another favourite rainy season *raga* of mine, *Megh*, though due to emphasis on different notes and treatment of notes, they can be distinguished easily.

flow out as tears, for the music would offer it a passage. I found those outlets through many genres, including the Urdu *ghazal*.

Writing My Song

Marom (2004) suggested that “song writing has been commonly reported to assist in spiritual expression” (p. 41), and I saw this happen in my case. One day I was singing a raga called *Multani*. I sang the khayal I had learnt long back; I did not feel connected, as I did not like the raga or the song. All this while, all my original compositions—bhajan or khayal both—had been the poetic voice of Kabir addressed to Ram, a formless entity that permeates the universe. Frequently in the past I, too, had chosen couplets or phrases that had the word Ram in it. Through Kabir’s Ram, I found myself connected to the infinite divine. Suddenly from within me a cry burst out, in my own words, more like beseeching for help:

*Suno kartar, naiya mori lagavo paar, padi majhdhaar—
raga Multani, Vilambit khayal.
(Hear me O Infinite One, rescue my boat [which is] midstream and about to sink.)*

This marked the start of the second stage of my musical recovery, for now not only was the voice a spiritual one, the way mine had been all this while, but the language was no longer borrowed from Kabir—it was my own. Citing Cheryl Dileo, Marom (2004) explained that “when spontaneous lyrics are added to vocal improvisation, the result is *song improvisation*” and that “this method enables clients to communicate messages and explore existential themes within the safe structure of a song” (p. 42). According to Sloan (1999), “Singing does reawaken what has been tucked away. It brings back into the light all our memories, dreams, tensions, conflicts, confidences, and insecurities. It connects us to a deeper place within ourselves because *sound is feeling*” (p. 8).

In expressing my insecurities about my “sinking boat” to someone who was not there to hear it, I expressed my feeling. It got out of me, as though there was someone who paid heed to it. My musical Self, at this juncture, suddenly became a unified Self, for I did not have to borrow from anyone’s language to sing or express my emotions; my musical expression was now an expression of me in totality, whether it be fear, insecurity, prayer, coaxing, or pining. In any case I could see that Kabir’s words came from a secure space within him, for he was an evolved master, whereas I was far from that inner stillness. So inevitably my expression would have a different quality to its verbal content than would Kabir’s. The absence of—and the searching for—a more integrated authentic Self caused my mental illness, and by moving toward that self, I slowly started healing. That healing showed in

many ways, including my ability to practise now for long stretches of time, which was unthinkable in the past. I could do any task with greater focus, with greater certainty of a positive outcome than ever before. This piece of written research is a testimony to that clarity and effort. In every aspect of my life this is manifest now—including my further research, my teaching, my concert performances, and my interactions with people around me.

Conclusion

Smeijsters (1997) warned that choosing a qualitative single-case method does not relieve researchers of the obligations to comply with scientific criteria. There are certain questions fundamental to scientific criteria: Has the phenomenon been represented as completely as possible? Has it been adequately conceptualized? Is enough known about factors influencing the phenomenon? In what respects is the phenomenon similar to or different from other phenomenon? In any qualitative inquiry, a self-serving bias is likely to be present; the choice of the research question is itself a part of the bias. As Aldridge (2005) stated, “There is inevitably a partiality in this process, in that by taking up causes, we open ourselves to bias” (p. 21).

This is the story of a researcher’s own recovery from mental illness, so the details are intimately known. However, citing Kenneth Aigen, Smeijsters (1997) suggested that “the observational, qualitative, hypothesis-generating, single-case approach is adequate for music therapy” (p. 26). By bringing together evidence from many sources, all of which have pointed toward this recovery, I have tried to be as transparent as possible.

This self-healing via music was largely accomplished because musical engagement was at an occupational level, not just a traditionally therapeutic one mediated by a therapist. Redirecting attention from abysmal, life-threatening depressions, which were often worsened by relationship crises, I have tried to harness my suffering by combining poetic and musical expression into goal-directed activities. Musical creativity vented my pain, and I could experience the indirect rewards of an expanded musical repertoire. Thanks to musical training, I could redirect extreme anguish from being self-harming toward creating music and getting the anguish out of me, letting those suicidal moments pass.

I propose to situate this autoethnographic case study in the context of emancipatory qualitative research—at the edge of music/music therapy research, practice, and theory. De Lissovoy, Campos, and Alarcon (2013) addressed the nature of this kind of research:

This conception would allow for the possibility that participant perspectives and understandings might be authoritative, even in the

first instance, and that equal and divergent understandings might be produced or uncovered in the course of research. . . . This involves a challenge to the intellectual, and the university itself, as the privileged ground for systematic knowledge production. (p. 32)

Perhaps this work belongs to a new genre of research and writing in which the afflicted are themselves finding their solutions in situations where no such services are available. It also brings forth the question to my mind, "What if there *had* been a music therapist for me? Could they have worked with me so well and so much?"

My work was with Indian music and ragas, and further research with other musical forms may also bring similar results. In addition, other factors in my recovery—dogs, homeopathy, moving into my own home to live alone, study and research, and of course my family—cannot be underestimated. Nor can this outcome be confined only to music, for this may also be possible with other art forms. However, a representation of this sort can be taken as a testimony of this researcher's recovery from bipolar disorder through the use of singing and composition, and it is hoped that more such narratives will emerge that take research and the practice of music therapy to new levels of inquiry and therapeutic outcomes.

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